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Overseeing the sheriff

NEXT MONTH, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will consider whether to create a permanent citizen review board to oversee the embattled Sheriff's Department. It's a tempting idea, given that the department is plagued by allegations of inmate abuse by deputies and is the subject of a federal civil rights probe into the treatment of mentally ill inmates as well as a criminal investigation into the use of excessive force. But the supervisors should resist the temptation. Now is not the right moment to undertake such a plan.

First, they should focus on setting up an office of inspector general for the Sheriff's Department, as recommended last year by the Citizens' Commission on Jail Violence, a task force the supervisors themselves created. An independent and empowered inspector general could provide the kind of muscular oversight that is needed to help reform the department. But instead of moving swiftly to fill such a post, the supervisors have dawdled and squabbled over how to proceed.

The fact is, there are already a number of people and offices overseeing the Sheriff's

Department, but they lack authority. The supervisors have a special counsel who has repeatedly issued reports but who does not have the power to force a discussion. There's an Office of Independent Review, but it too often serves as an advisor to the sheriff. And the ombudsman, created to handle citizens' complaints, fails to regularly perform that job. The jails commission noted that too often the Sheriff's Department has only "paid lip-service to those oversight bodies." The proposed inspector general's office would consolidate the functions of those other offices.

No doubt, some of the supervisors will argue that any watchdog agency will have only limited influence over Sheriff Lee Baca because he is a directly elected official. It's true that it is the voters, not the supervisors or any other overseer, who ultimately decide whether Baca stays or goes. But a strong inspector general, whose office is adequately funded and staffed, could have a profound impact on the sheriff by maintaining a public spotlight on the problems in his office.

A citizen review board might not be a bad idea at some point. But what is needed right now is meaningful oversight, not another layer of toothless review.

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500 L.A. inmates to go to Taft

County board OKs \$75-million, five-year contract to free up local jail beds and avoid early releases.

By Abby Sewell

Hoping to ensure that Los Angeles County jail inmates convicted of serious crimes serve their full sentences, the Board of Supervisors agreed Tuesday to a contract for hundreds of prison beds at a San Joaquin Valley lockup.

The \$75-million, five-year agreement with the Taft Community Correctional Facility, run by the city of Taft in Kern County, will allow the county to house about 500 long-term inmates there, freeing up beds in L.A. County jails so other inmates will serve a greater portion of their terms.

The move came a week after supervisors agreed to spend more than \$25 million to house 500 county inmates at government-run mountain firefighting camps around L.A. County.

Supervisors Zev Yaroslavsky and Mark Ridley-Thomas abstained from the vote after voicing concerns that using state funds intended to help counties deal with prison realignment for the Taft contract will divert resources from other programs. Ridley-Thomas also argued that the county hasn't fully explored other ways to reduce crowding, including releasing inmates awaiting trial.

Inmates who will be sent to Taft and the firefighting camps are nonviolent felons who previously would have gone to state prisons. But those lower-level felons are now sentenced to local jail systems under a program known as realignment, which was implemented two years ago to help the state comply with a court order to reduce prison crowding.

That shift has resulted in many other L.A. County inmates, including some convicted of violent crimes, being released after serving a small fraction of their sentences.

With the addition of fire camp and Taft beds, sheriff's officials said that "traditional" county inmates convicted of violent offenses will

now serve their full term.

"I know that the general public would like to see these people serve 100% of their time, and what we have with Taft is an opportunity," said Supervisor Gloria Molina, who joined with supervisors Don Knabe and Michael D. Antonovich to approve the proposal.

County officials said they needed to move quickly on the Taft contract because the state of California also was eyeing available beds at the facility. The state announced this week that it has contracted with correctional facilities in Adelanto and McFarland for 1,400 beds.

State Senate Speaker Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg (D-Sacramento) appeared at the county board meeting Tuesday to discuss a proposal by state lawmakers to divert funds to programs that would reduce recidivism as a way to meet a federal court order to reduce prison crowding in California. Federal judges had ordered the state to reduce the prisons' population by 9,600 inmates by the end of the year but on Tuesday agreed to a 30-day extension.

"We have a chance to do something smarter, and take a freight ship that is heading in one expensive and unproductive direction and turn it around," Steinberg said.

Under the legislative plan, some funds directed to the county could be used for such programs as opening more courtrooms dedicated to mentally ill defendants and those with substance abuse issues.

Community activists pressing for alternatives to incarceration objected to the county's plan to send inmates to Taft. They said the shift would create a hardship on family members who will have to travel longer distances to visit relatives in jail.

"I beg you to not just send our boys away in a faraway place," said Ruth Darby, who said her grandson served time in a prison upstate and the family was unable to visit him because of the cost of traveling.

Activists also raised concerns that there had been outbreaks of valley fever at a separate federal prison in Taft.

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